

Little Things Mean a Lot

Having an environmental plan can save green in the long run.

By Jamie J. Gooch
Editor

You probably know your course is environmentally responsible, but could you prove it? Is there anything else you could do better? There's only one way to know for sure. Following an environmental management plan allows you to be certain you're doing everything you can to protect and enhance the environment.

"Golf course superintendents are all interested in being good stewards of the land," says Michigan Department of Agriculture's Debbie Swartz. "They just need the tools and information on how to do that in the most cost-effective and efficient manner."

Swartz is program manager of the Michigan Turfgrass Environmental Stewardship Program (MTESP). The program combines the efforts of state agencies, the turfgrass industry, Michigan State University and environmental advocacy groups to encourage environmental stewardship. There are a number of environmental management programs across the country, but Michigan's goes the extra step to certify that its members are in compliance with environmental laws that apply to golf courses.

"We first look at federal and state requirements, and in particular, the environmental laws that apply to golf courses," Swartz says. "Then we look at how we can go beyond the law to further elevate the protection of natural resources and maximize the green space value golf courses provide."

ASSESS, THEN ADDRESS

An environmental management plan begins with assessing your course and your maintenance practices. An assessment includes taking stock of the environmental resources on a course and your impact upon those resources.

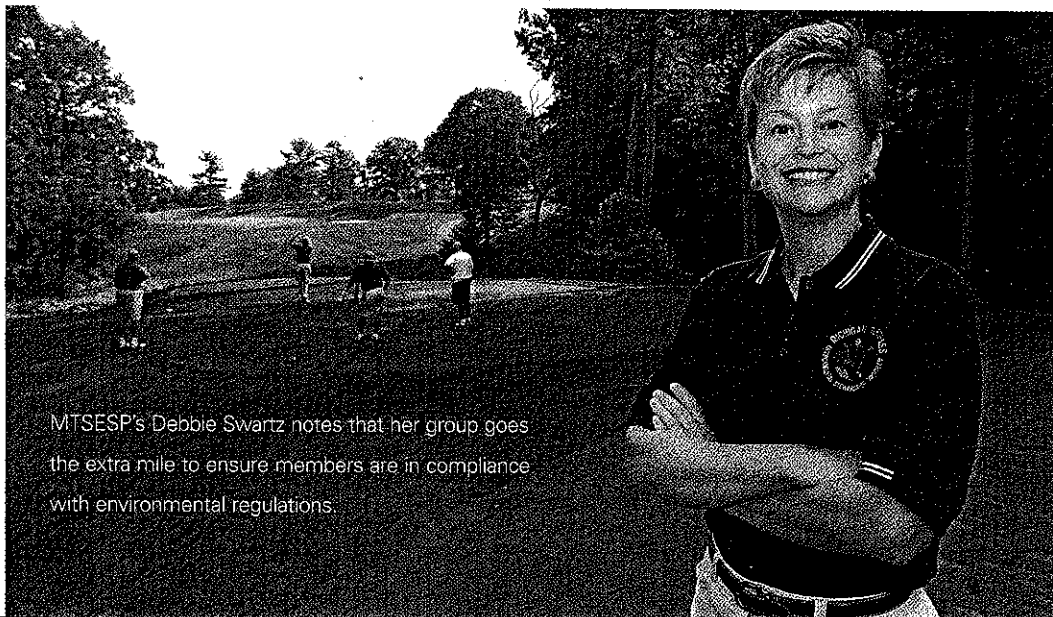
"Once we know how a course impacts the environment, then we can look for ways to minimize or eliminate that impact," Swartz says.

Golf course superintendents can turn to a number of resources for help conducting an assessment, from consultants, universities, and associations to self-guided assessments.

"It's helpful to get additional education on assessment strategies, or ideally, to have a second set of

A 3-Step Plan

1. Evaluate natural resources
2. Identify what could impact natural resources
3. Identify ways to minimize or eliminate those impacts



MTESP's Debbie Swartz notes that her group goes the extra mile to ensure members are in compliance with environmental regulations.

eyes from a third party visit the site and make suggestions," Swartz says. "Often, it takes additional educational resources and a person on-site to properly identify risks and solutions."

An on-site assessment is part of MTESP. The site visit is used to identify actions that can be taken to ensure compliance and elevate the protection of natural resources. The next step is to prioritize those actions.

"An equipment wash area may be sloppy, for example, but if it's environmentally sound, improvements to the system can be placed lower on the list," Swartz says. "If, on the other hand, you were to find fuel storage tanks located adjacent to a waterway, even though they may be working well operationally, they pose a potential risk to the resource. We can help to sort things out by giving the superintendent a look at the big picture and what needs to be done first to either minimize or eliminate those risks."

DETAILS, DETAILS

Minimizing the impact of a golf course on the environment may sound like an extensive process, and it can be. However, it can also mean taking simple steps that have long-term benefits.

"Often, it's the little things that make a big difference," Swartz says. "Floor drains in the shop are a good example. Some drain straight into the ground — they're not connected to a sanitary sewer line. You may have chemicals such as gasoline, oils and solvents that could impact ground water if they're spilled in the shop and go down the floor drain. But it's simple to seal the drain and maintain spills with a mop. That completely eliminates that risk to the environment."

Having a spill kit on hand is another easy way to avoid environmental problems.

"If you have a fuel leak on a parking lot that drains to the storm drain, you can use the kit to cover the drain or contain the fuel spill," Swartz says. "It's an easy way to prevent a serious impact to waterways."

Something as simple as switching to fluorescent bulbs in the shop and only using the amount of light that is needed can save energy and costs, she adds.

BIG CHANGES

"Many changes don't take much money to implement. A lot are under couple hundred bucks," Swartz says. "Some cost more. The key to getting the bigger changes funded is educating and involving management. If they understand what is needed to comply

and the environmental benefit, they'll be far more supportive."

Swartz suggests superintendents make a case for big-ticket items, such as building a pesticide mixing and loading pad or purchasing a new equipment wash recycling system, by laying out the risks to the environment, and the potential cost associated with an environmental accident. Once management understands the costs and benefits, they usually choose to invest in reducing risk to the environment, she says.

The right choice for the environment often has benefits for golfers and the superintendent. Buffer strips are a good example: When installed properly, buffer strips of tall grass between a waterway and the course can slow runoff during a storm event, capturing nutrients and sediments before they drain into the water. Buffer strips can also be aesthetically pleasing, a challenge for golfers and can create wildlife habitat.

PROMOTION PART OF PLAN

In addition to helping the environment and saving money, creating and following an environmental management plan is a great way to build community relations. Swartz recommends that superintendents who have an environmental management plan in place let golfers and the community know about it.

"Here in Michigan, the Michigan Turfgrass Environmental Stewardship Program works with certified courses to produce signs, create a press release and recognize their accomplishments at community events," she says. "We're also working with Travel Michigan to promote certified courses as tourist destinations."

MTESP has even partnered with an insurance company that is willing to provide insurance breaks for certified courses. "Because the courses have been certified to be in compliance, are minimizing risks, and have been independently verified, they feel the courses are worthy of reduced insurance rates," Swartz says.

But the true benefits of an environmental management plan can only be realized if superintendents and managers take the first step. For information on how you can begin a plan, contact your state association, local university or an environmental consultant. Audubon International (www.auduboninternational.org) and the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (www.gcsaa.org) also offer environmental management plan information. In addition, Swartz will present a course on the topic at the Golf Industry Show on Feb. 20. ■

There are many small things superintendents can do to help the environment, but there are six bigger issues that are critical:

1. Water use
2. Pesticide and fertilizer use
3. Fuel handling and storage
4. Equipment and product choices
5. Equipment washing
6. Energy conservation and waste reduction
7. Habitat enhancement